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REALISM AND PERCEPTION¹

THERE is no getting around the fact that, however idealistic our ultimate philosophy may be, in the moment of percept we are all realists. The things that we perceive force themselves upon us with so potent an independence and objectivity that for the time being it is impossible for us to regard them seriously as in any sense dependent upon our knowledge or even upon *Bewusstsein überhaupt*. Perception is the great stronghold of realism, to which it may retreat and in which it may feel tolerably secure, no matter how disastrous the battle may have proved in the less sheltered portions of the field.

But while realism when intrenched within perception may feel secure, it has seldom been able to find the intrenchments really comfortable. It is odd, but it is in my opinion unquestionably true, that none of the three schools of realism which historically have had the greatest prominence have been able to give a satisfactory, or even a tenable account of perception. I refer, of course, to naïve realism, the Lockian dualism, and neo-realism. Because naïve realism has never questioned the certainty of our knowledge and because neo-realism has especially backed itself to vindicate it, they have both propounded doctrines that seem at first consistent enough with the facts of normal and veridical perception, but which are quite incapable of giving any sort of satisfactory account of what happens in illusion and error. Lack of time makes it impossible for me to defend this statement here, and I therefore simply lay it down, rather dogmatically, with many apologies to my neo-realist friends. Locke saw the difficulty in the case of naïve realism and to avoid it constructed a doctrine which should explain illusion and error, but he unfortunately forgot to leave room for the possibility of true knowledge and veridical perception. "Since," to use his own words, "the mind hath no other immediate object but its own ideas," it would seem to be precluded from perceiving or knowing anything else. The difficulties of accounting for illusion on the one hand, and for veridical perception on the other are, in fact, the Scylla and Charybdis upon one or the other of which the realistic barque seems somehow bound to go to pieces. Indeed we might even go farther and insist that both Locke's sailing craft and the mighty modern steamship of neo-realism with all its scientific apparatus have somehow managed to outdo every ship of classical antiquity in getting themselves wrecked on *both* Scylla and Charybdis. For if, as Locke

¹ Read at the meeting of the American Philosophical Association at Cambridge in December, 1918.

insisted, the mind hath no other object but its own ideas, it is difficult to see how it ever could be mistaken, and if this is so, illusion and error would be no more possible than true knowledge of the independent objects in which realism believes. And the new realism, as its critics have more than once pointed out, has no satisfactory way of dealing with the psychophysiological facts in the perception process, nor with the time differences between the events perceived and the act of perception. In all this I am of course taking for granted the adequacy of the very forceful and detailed criticisms that have been made upon neo-realism, criticisms which have brought to light difficulties which all but the neo-realists regard as well-nigh insurmountable, and which most of the neo-realists themselves, if I am not mistaken, will candidly admit to be at least serious.

All this is strange enough in view of the fact I pointed out at the beginning of this paper, namely, that perception is the very home and citadel of realism; and it would seem to suggest that it behooves the would-be realist to examine more closely the state or process of perception and make more sure than he has sometimes done in the past of the nature of his stronghold.

What the accepted account of perception among psychologists really is it would be difficult to say. Both James and Sully define perception as that process by which the mind "supplements a sense-impression by an accompaniment or escort of revived sensations, the whole aggregate of actual and revived sensations being solidified or integrated into the form of a percept, that is, an apparently immediate apprehension or cognition of an object now present in a particular locality or region of space."² This definition plainly recognizes two related elements or aspects in perception, namely, the fusion of sensory and ideational material and the consciousness of objects in a particular part of space. To the second of these aspects, however, James and Sully make little further reference, almost all of their accounts of perception being devoted to the mechanism of selection, fusion, *etc.*, of mental content. Wundt makes perception a particular kind of apperception, and his entire interest is centered upon the way in which different parts of mental content get interrelated.³ Following these great authorities, and possibly also as a result of the experimental point of view so dominant to-day, the majority of American psychologists, both structuralists and functionalists, have confined their attention to the selection and fusion of mental content found within the percept, implying at least by their silence that nothing more is discoverable within the perceptive process.

² *Principles of Psy.*, Vol. II., p. 79. Sully's *Outlines*, p. 153.

³ *Outlines of Psychology*, section on "Consciousness and Attention."

Thus Miss Calkins makes perception "analyzable into irreducible sensational elements."⁴ Breese defines it as "the consciousness of the qualities of an object synthesized into an object;"⁵ Yerkes makes it a psychic complex consisting "wholly or chiefly of sensations or images,"⁶ while Judd and Angell treat it in essentially the same way. One of the two definitions of the object of consciousness contained in the official Delimitation of Psychological Terms, issued by the American Psychological Association in March, 1918, expresses very exactly this point of view; it explicitly identifies the object of consciousness with "the content of consciousness viewed as a term in the subject-object relation." The other definition proposed in the same official circular leaves room for, and in fact suggests, the distinction between object and content which so many writers on perception have failed to make. The object of consciousness, namely, is here defined as "that of which the subject of consciousness is aware."⁷ Two recent American writers, moreover, have gone into the question with some care and attempted an analysis of the situation, an analysis which has at least made it clear that perception is by no means so simple an affair as to be capable of adequate treatment by a mere description of content. "We must admit," says Pillsbury, "that the naïve mind and all minds in naïve moments deal directly with objects. Secondly, these objects are not merely compounds of mental elements. . . . All that is intended is never given in the mental states. The mental content merely means what we are thinking about; it does not reproduce it or constitute it."⁸ Unfortunately Professor Pillsbury leaves the matter here, devoting all his efforts to the problem already so often solved of the manner in which the mental elements fuse to form the percept. Titchener goes farther than this. "Perceptions," he writes, "are selected groups of sensations, in which images are incorporated as an integral part of the whole process. But this is not all; the essential thing about them is still to be named: and it is this—that perceptions have meaning. No sensation means; a sensation simply goes on in various attributive ways, intensively, clearly, spatially, and so forth. All perceptions mean; they go on, also, in various attributive ways; but they go on meaningly."⁹ "Meaning," then is "the essential thing" in perception. On analysis, however, meaning turns out to be "context"—"one mental process is the meaning of

⁴ *A First Book in Psychology*, p. 63.

⁵ *Psychology*, p. 197.

⁶ *Introduction to Psychology*, Chapter XIV.

⁷ *Psychological Bulletin*, March, 1918, p. 92.

⁸ *Fundamentals of Psychology*, pp. 268-69.

⁹ *A Text-book of Psychology*, p. 367.

another mental process if it is that other's context." "The organism faces the situation by some bodily attitude and the characteristic *sensations* which the attitude arouses give meaning to the process which stands at the conscious focus, *are* psychologically the *meaning* of that process."¹⁰ In other words, while Professor Titchener seems to feel very strongly that perception is more than a combination of sensations and images, he comes back after his analysis of meaning to a position not essentially unlike that which he seemed at first to be attacking. If we take into account both those images and ideas which are the immediate content of consciousness and also those which constitute the "context" of this content, then on Professor Titchener's theory, perception will after all consist of nothing but sensations and images.

If we would find a really determined attempt to analyse that aspect of perception which is probably implicit in the common assertion that perception is "consciousness of objects," and which seems to be nearly explicit in the latter part of the definition quoted from James and Sully, we must turn to the English psychologists. Professor Stout and Professor Ward are more keenly aware than any American psychologist of the inadequacy of that view of perception which would make it merely a fusion of sensations and images. "Perception as we know it," writes Professor Ward, "involves not only recognition (or assimilation) and localization or 'spatial references,' but it usually involves 'objective reference' as well. We may perceive sound or light without any presentation of that which sounds or shines; but nevertheless we do not regard such sound or light as merely the object of our attention, as having only immanent existence, but as the quality or change or state of a thing, an object distinct not only from the subject attending but from all presentations whatever to which it attends."¹¹ In similar vein Professor Stout insists that external objects "are cognized as existing independently of us, just as we exist independently of them."¹² The realization of this independence and externality forms an essential part of the experience which we know as (external) perception. "The external thing does not consist for us merely in the sensible features by which it is qualified. There must be something to which these sensory contents are referred as attributes." This reference, in Professor Stout's opinion, is brought about "by the projection of the self. The not-self which forms the indispensable nucleus or inner being of the external object is apprehended

¹⁰ *Loc. cit.* Italics mine.

¹¹ From Ward's article on Psychology in the *Britannica*.

¹² *The Groundwork of Psychology*, p. 90.

as in some degree a counterpart of our own subjective existence, and in particular as exercising a motor activity and as having a continuous existence more or less like our own."¹³

I am not concerned to defend Professor Stout's theory of the projection of the self, though I think much may be said for it. But I am convinced that no theory of perception can long remain satisfactory which does not specifically recognize that in every case of external perception we consciously apprehend the object as "exercising a motor activity and as having a continuous existence." Perception in other words, has two factors, the sensory and ideational content, upon which exclusively the majority of psychologists have centered their attention, and the *meaning* and *outer reference* which we have found recognized in part by Pillsbury and Titchener, Stout and Ward, and apparently also by James and Sully. As I watch my own processes of perception, this outer reference seems to have two closely related aspects: it is both a meaning and a tendency to reaction. Both of these, moreover, presuppose an implicit recognition of a world independent of my consciousness but sustaining dynamic or causal relations with my experiences and emotions. This recognition is of course not an explicit thought—perception is much too immediate for that—but it is implicitly there in the background of consciousness none the less, and this is one of the things that differentiate perception from sensation. The infant's chaos of meaningless sensations grows into the adult's world of things through the fusion, on the one hand, of certain sensory and ideational qualities, and on the other by the development of partly instinctive and partly habitual attitudes of reference and reaction. The child's notion of an external dynamic world grows up hand in hand with his notion of himself, and his attitudes toward this world are as genuinely parts of his perceptive process as are the fusion of sensory content which results in what we have learned to call the percept. In the act of perception there is ever the consciousness that one is dealing with an independent and dynamic outer object and it is this external object, and not just a group of sensed and remembered qualities, which one means and toward which one tends to react in perception. Through the force of repetition a given group of qualities comes to suggest certain future experiences; but these experiences are not all that the quality group means to the perceiver. It means to him primarily an active center, independent of his perceiving, but capable of producing the interesting experiences in question. Since the concept of an active, independent, external world is present implicitly in every act of adult perception, it is impossible

¹³ *Loc. cit.*, p. 97.

to maintain successfully, as Professor Titchener seeks to do, that the *meaning* of a percept is exhausted in the sensations which are its "context." We mean not so much future experiences of our own as outer objects which may cause those experiences and of whose presence and activity the given group of sensations is a token. We are enabled to mean an external object which is more than our immediate content because we have, as mature men, built up a concept of an external and independent world, and also because we are endowed with certain instinctive reactions upon that world. Our ability to mean an object other than the group of qualities immediately sensed is in part an application of our general implicit recognition of an external world, in part a corollary of our instinctive reactions to that world.

The quality-group actually found in perception—what psychologists usually call the percept—is thus but one part of the perceptive state or process. Its function moreover is now plain. It stands, namely, as a token of the presence of the object, it puts us on our guard or prompts us to react toward it. It is an exaggerated intellectualism in our psychology which has tended to exhaust perception in the percept; the percept is there not so much for its own sake as for the sake of guiding our action upon the external environment. Its function is to act as a symbol of the object which we mean and to which we intend to react but which is seldom or never identical with it. The percept *means* more than it is.

This view of the psychology of perception is not without its bearing upon epistemology. For a realism which takes its stand upon the testimony of immediate experience and the analysis of the more careful psychologists, insisting that "the mental content merely means what we are thinking about but does not reproduce it or constitute it,"—such a realism, I say, will be able to avoid *both* the difficulties which have proved so serious for its predecessors. Such a realism, taking its cue from the psychological view of perception just suggested, will make a sharp distinction between object and psychical content. What is before the mind, what one means and reacts to, it will not confuse with that which is *within* the mind, whether regarded as a psychic state or as a *datum*. The function of a percept will thus be seen to be that of standing for and pointing to the object, that by means of which we perceive the object; it will no longer be confused with the object itself. This view of the percept and its function will perhaps be clearer if we consider the analogous case of the place and function of the concept in thought. When I think of Napoleon my object is surely Napoleon, and not my mental content, my concept of him. Object and content are thus

quite distinct. But I can not think of Napoleon without a concept; my concept is thus the tool by which I think of him. To have a concept *is* to conceive. In like fashion, when I see my friend bodily before me, he is the object of my sight, it is he that I see, not my percept. Surely he *is* not just my percept—as if I were the Absolute dreaming my dream. He has a being of his own, independent of my sight. But I see him by means of my percept. If I had no eyes I could not see him; if I had no optic nerve and no visual cerebral centers I could not see him; and if any part of this physiological apparatus should fail to function so that I had no visual percept of him I could not see him. A percept is thus one of the tools I use in perceiving; and to *have* a percept (with the correlative attitude and meaning) *is* to perceive.

A little reflection will, I think, make it plain that this distinction of content from object makes it possible for the realist easily to avoid the difficulties which, as I have pointed out, are so disastrous to both Locke and the neo-realists. Since real things rather than “ideas” are recognized as our objects, knowledge of reality and veridical perception again become possible; and for the same reason a place is also made for the possibility of mistake and illusion. It also becomes plain that the root difficulty in both the other schools of realism is to be found in the view which they have in common, namely, in their confusion of content with object. For be it noted that in spite of the ridicule which the neo-realists would pour upon Locke’s doctrine, they share with him (and for that matter with Berkeley) the view that our percepts (viewed not, indeed, as psychic states but as quality groups) are our objects—that our objects are just the groups of qualities or “neutral entities” which we directly find. Now if my object is numerically identical with the immediate content of my consciousness then plainly there is no possible place for the facts that physiological psychology has to tell concerning the processes by which my (external and independent) object produces or influences my conscious content. I say this because it seems to me that for an object to start a chain of vibrations which eventually result in its own creation, is a task compared with which the lifting of oneself by one’s bootstraps would be a simple parlor trick. Divergence in time between the perceived event and the perception of it also is out of the question if my object *is* my percept. The difficulties which neo-realism has found in the explanation of error and illusion, moreover, can be seen plainly to flow from this same fundamental misinterpretation of perception; for if my object is just my content it is inconceivable that I should ever be mistaken about it. But by a rectification of this fundamental mistake con-

cerning the nature of perception and the function of the percept, realism may become at least a truly tenable doctrine.

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PSYCHOLOGY AND SCIENTIFIC METHOD

I. ANIMISM

OUR age interprets everything differently from any previous age of the world because of its individualistic bias and preoccupations. The element or unit—social, political, economic, logical—has achieved a unique reality of its own, and, in turn, claims a distinct ontological, or at least methodological status. Now this status, like the commercial credit of a nation, is in a certain sense an artefact; it is real as the ideal is real: it is only in part actual. Political democracy has had a guiding fiction of this sort for over a century, an ideal reality which is undergoing a transformation, before our very eyes, into a still different ideally real form in terms of what we call industrial democracy. This transformation is taking place by reason of the new demands of the actual. Never has the guiding fiction been unreal, but it has at times lost touch with the situation which generated it: at such times it has turned for security from its original methodological utility and set up for itself a claim of ontological validity. The problem of the world just now is the difficult one, in the midst of the momentous actualities of the present, of recognizing the real in the emerging, without repudiating it in the passing, ideal.

The same is true of that part of human activity and interest which we have come to call psychology. Like every other science, like every other art, like every part of the life of every individual or group of sentient creatures whose behavior is not wholly statable as mere immediate response to stimulus, psychology has had, now has, its guiding fictions. At a time when the soul could be conceived as a finer form of matter (as air or moisture or fire) diffused through external objects as well as through the body itself—a form of matter which is breathed in and out, perhaps, to maintain the balance of vital with environmental forces, and which, in perception, is conceived to be transmissible in diaphanous films from the object to the sense-organ—at such a time we see the psychological ideal in process of becoming disengaged from the actual. It still stands very close to the facts; hence the power of such primitive conceptions to compel our attention: we find ourselves in any new formulation, as in recent behaviorism, going back, in principle, to a kind of animism.